Precipice of the Deep

Author's note: This story rests upon a true event that occurred on the dark night of January 30, 1994. During an interview in June 2012 for the KTOO documentary Alaska's Marine Highway, I stated that we used a cargo net during this rescue operation. However, subsequent to the interview, I reviewed my old notes showing that we used a Jacob's ladder. I am guessing as to happenings in the small aluminum skiff we found that night, but I believe I am on track derived upon information we gathered from the rescued couple.

One prolonged blast of the ship's whistle every two minutes resounded throughout the night, and the day. Rule 35 of the *Navigation Rules* is clear: "In or near an area of restricted visibility, whether by day or night, the signals prescribed in this Rule shall be used as follows: A power-driven vessel making way through the water shall sound at intervals of not more than two minutes one prolonged blast."

With each blast of the whistle, a deep, masculine blast, the kind that reaches down as though to gather a deep breath, thunders over the waters, and echoes from the nearby mountains of the Canadian Inside Passage. The M/V *Matanuska*'s housetop shook. Hers was a whistle tone of ample depth and husky resonance. It is a serious sound meant to be heard by other vessels, its cadence of one blast every two minutes communicating to her audience of unseen vessels that the *Matanuska* was underway, making way, "in or near an area of restricted visibility."

Fog had set down on the water from the time the ship departed its last port of call in Bellingham, Washington. Casting off her mooring lines in the late evening, the ship with her crew and passengers proceeded north to Ketchikan, Alaska into a dense swirl of mist and fog. Placed on automatic by

the captain, the ship's fog whistle began its work immediately upon departure.

Engines were left on standby for immediate maneuver, a lookout was posted and standing at the bow. Conversations in the wheelhouse was hushed and kept to a minimum. A wheelhouse window is pulled down where a mate from time to time placed his head into the open air listening for the fog whistles of other vessels. The salt air smelled heavy of dense fog. *Matanuska*'s navigators stood at their places of duty, watching the finely tuned radars for any signs of vessel traffic on a collision course with our ship.

Not a ripple was found on the water, and the air fell to a silent calm between blasts. In conditions as these, finely tuned radars can detect the smallest of targets, from a floating log dead in the water, to a seagull or a duck swimming on the surface. Yet, long experience taught that a wooden boat with a rounded stern presenting the right aspect or angle could become invisible to marine radar.

I thought back to a near collision with a wooden halibut schooner, built with a smooth, rounded stern. She was traveling in the same direction as our ship and directly ahead. Hiding underneath the radar heading flash and obscured in the night's darkness, she remained unseen by both the navigator and the lookout's eyes. Radar energy deflected on the rounded stern, and did not return strong enough reflected energy for radar detection.

Our ship drew near, as though unintentionally to run the undetected halibut schooner down. Behind the mountains, a rising full moon began to throw a dim glow across the water's surface, just enough to provide some light and cause a fraction of the dark night to retreat. Nature's provision was to preclude a disaster.

"I see the wave of a vessel's wake on the port side," the bow lookout reported.

Then came a report of a second wake wave on our starboard side. Both were converging to a point dead ahead.

“There’s a boat dead ahead!” cried the lookout.

“Hard right rudder,” order I ordered to the helmsman.

Down went the wheel, and our ship responded with a sharp turn to the starboard. As she turned, the form of the unseen halibut schooner emerged in the moonlit darkness, passing down the port side of our ship. The mystery vessel carried no lights. It was only by the use of a lookout and a rising moon that prevented a collision. I learned a valuable lesson from this near miss: *Radar does not find all targets.*

Matanuska’s wheelhouse crew was on high alert, listening, watching, and maintaining their guard. *Constant vigilance is the price of safety.* The old saying was on every person’s mind. Radar glow illuminated their faces. Below in the engine room, the assistant engineer remained in the control booth, “ready for immediate maneuver.”

Presently, well along the voyage up the coast along the Inside Passage of British Columbia, there were no indications that the fog would lift anytime soon, if anything, it became denser. With unending monotony, the whistle blew her prolonged blast with equal regularity. I had been in the wheelhouse for most of the night and when I returned to my stateroom, I had difficulty sleeping. Having turned over the watch to the ship’s pilot, I decided to turn in for some rest. Sleep came slowly. After awhile, the whistle blasts faded from my ears and mind, and a refreshing rest overcame everything else.

My rest was uninterrupted, the telephone mounted on the bulkhead immediately above my bunk did not ring, and no one came knocking on my

stateroom door. When I did awaken, several hours had passed, and it came as a sudden revelation that the fog whistle had fallen silent.

Angeline had wanted to see her grandmother in Klemtu. Promises had been made to pay her a visit, but short days and January weather had prevented any traveling from her home in Waglisla, just across the channel from Bella Bella. Her only means to travel was in her boy friend Herman's skiff. Wind and waves were always a problem, and the fog had hung on for several days in a row. Herman's boat was an open aluminum-hulled skiff with a low-cut transom stern. Good visibility and calm water were prerequisites for a safe voyage up the Inside Passage to Klemtu.

A view of Bella Bella from the Kennicott while southbound in Lama Passage.

Herman had just purchased a new outboard engine. With 50 HP of new power to use, Herman was anxious to try out the new engine. A trip to Klemtu was ideal for his sea trial, and so he waited for the fog to lift, and told Angeline to be "ready on short notice."

Klemtu is forty-four nautical miles north of Waglisla on Swindle Island, and Herman knew the country well. He would take some back channels behind Ivory Island to avoid the open waters of Milbanke Sound, midway between Waglisla and their destination. He planned to pass through Blair Inlet, between Ivory and Cecilia Islands. It was entangled with numerous rocks and small islets, but suitable for small craft piloted by those with local knowledge.

From Blair Inlet, the duo would proceed toward Vancouver Rock, and then Merilia Passage behind the Gaudin Islands, and across the northern reaches of Milbanke Sound to Jorkins Point and Finlayson Channel. Finlayson

Channel led to Klemtu Passage and their final destination.

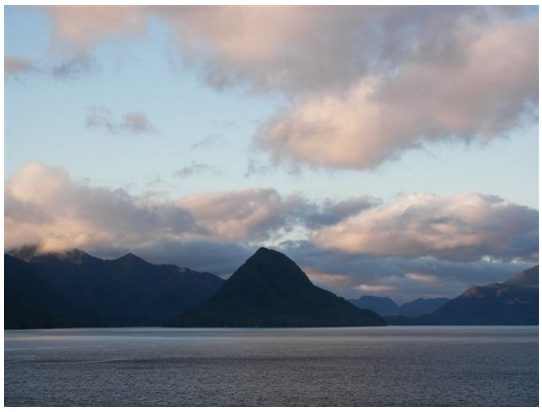
It was a low, fractured landscape of winding deep tentacles of sea, dotted with rocks and islets reaching inland. Shores were covered in dense stands of old-growth Sitka spruce, hemlock and cedar, scenting the air both from the sea and the forest. Once in Finlayson Channel, however, low land gave way to steep mountains rising from sea. Thickly clothed in timber, except for a few scars from large landslides that reached the waterline, mountains rose to 2,600 feet and closed in from both sides of the channel.

Fog began to lift, and Herman gave Angeline her "short notice." In his rush to get underway, Herman boarded his skiff, pulled on the starter chord, and the new engine started up without any effort. He dressed lightly and did not bring oars, lifejackets, extra clothing, a spare engine, flashlights, tool kit, a VHF radio, flares, or a bilge bailer. After all, it was only a "test run." There was no food onboard, but he did bring his high caliber bolt-action rifle. Angeline's grandmother would prepare their dinner and perhaps have a warm red huckleberry pie on her kitchen table waiting for them to celebrate their arrival.

Angeline put on her rubber boots and followed Herman down the dock ramp. At his direction, she sat on the forward bow thwart with her back to the wind, facing Herman sitting at the stern. One thing she always carried as a matter of habit was a box of matches, wrapped inside a plastic sack to keep them dry, and stored in her coat pocket. Herman bent over to check the fuel level in the gas tank. It was full to capacity with oil-mixed gasoline.

Running smoothly, Herman's new engine pleased him, and he smiled at Angeline sitting in the bow. Her long, dark hair blew aft toward Herman, who remained on the stern thwart with his hand on the engine throttle and tiller.

Angeline returned a smile to Herman, and her admiration. He had worked hard to save enough money to purchase the engine. She was grateful finally to be on her way to Klemtu.


A view of the China Hat (Cone Island) with Klemtu and Klemtu Passage on its left side

Clear of the harbor, Herman opened the throttle to full speed lifting the bow. The engine's propeller bit into the water, and the stern came down. An energetic thrust stream and vessel wake passed astern. There was little freeboard between the low-cut transom and the surface of the water where the engine was mounted. As long as Herman kept his vessel moving forward at a fast rate, there was little danger of any water entering into the boat.

Along the way, they met few boats. It was as though the country were empty of any humanity. Passing the Dryad Point Lighthouse, they sped away into the Canadian wilderness for Klemtu and grandmother's house. Having made the trip many times in the past, this one promised to be different. With a new and more powerful engine, it would take less time. Herman calculated it would take an hour and forty-five minutes to cover the distance, instead of the usual three hours it used to take in the past with his older, less powerful engine.

Scanning the horizon ahead for logs, driftwood, or floating kelp, Herman watched the water attentively. Sea birds scattered out of their way, too filled with small feeder fish for an easy liftoff. The sky cleared though patches of fog lingered here and there. They expected to arrive in Klemtu before nightfall descended.

A strong scent of cedar filled the cold air as they meticulously followed the planned route. Leaving the shelter of Merilia Passage, they stuck out across

the top of Milbanke Sound to Jorkins Point, the southern point of Swindle Island and the entrance to Finlayson Channel. Following along the rocky shoreline, Herman proceeded to Swindle Point.

Rounding Swindle Point, the summit of 1,285-foot high Cone Island came into view. Locally known as the "China Hat" this distinctive peak was an aid to navigation to show the way toward the nearly invisible, shadow-covered Klemtu Passage along its left side, a narrow and deep, but through waterway leading to Trout Bay and the settlement of Klemtu.

Perched along the western shore of Klemtu Passage, Angeline could not wait to get to her grandmother's house. With the China Hat in sight, their destination was not far and almost in hand. Both she and Herman had become cold in the sharp January air. A stiff 15-knot north-northeast wind greeted them. In the 44 º-Fahrenheit temperatures, the chill factor felt as though it were 25º. Seas were rising into a short, nasty chop. Herman slowed his craft down to lessen the possibility of making a drenching sea spray, and the effects of a low chill factor.

Adjusting the throttle downward, the engine coughed, and stalled, and fell silent.

Visions of being in the warmth of her grandmother's house vanished, and the skiff drifted to a stop. All that could be heard were wind, sea, and Herman cursing at his engine. Pulling on the starting chord, the new engine refused to start.

With Klemtu hidden behind the China Hat, but nearly in sight, the skiff turned in the wind, with her stern up into the wind, and her bow pointing downwind like a weather vane. Angeline and Herman began a slow drift southward, where the wind and the ebbing tide would take them, down Finlayson Channel and out into Milbanke Sound toward the open Pacific Ocean.

Perhaps it was something simple, a faulty spark plug, or a plugged fuel filter.

Herman had no tools. With no spare engine or oars, he could not maneuver his boat to keep her bow into the wind by motoring or rowing toward Klemtu. Without a VHF radio, he could not call for help. Without any flares, he could not signal other vessels. Without any bilge pump, he could not pump the water slopping into the boat over the low-cut transom stern. A choppy sea battered the stern spilling seawater into the boat. Water levels in the bilge rose slowly, eventually immersing their feet in cold water.

Angeline and Herman both could have removed their boots and used them to scoop the water and pour it overboard, but apparently this did not occur to them. Seawater continued slopping over the transom stern and little by little, the water became deeper inside the boat. With no other vessels in sight, with no lifejackets to don, drifting farther from land, Herman and Angeline's lives were now in peril.

Perhaps the engine was only flooded with extra gasoline, and needed some time to drain and dry before attempting to start it again. Herman waited an appropriate amount of time, and tried once more to start his new engine. Putting extra effort in pulling on the starting lanyard as though it may help, but regardless, the engine would not start. As Herman worked on the engine, the water level gained on the boat.

The China Hat disappeared from view behind Jorkins Point. Soon they were out into the open spaces and depths of Milbanke Sound. Drifting in the north wind and a south flowing ebb tide, they shivered, and as the water level in the boat rose, the skiff's freeboard decreased allowing even more water to spill into the boat. Feeling a slight ocean swell, it was only a matter of time before their craft would be swamped, and they would be left struggling to stay afloat in the cold waters of the North Pacific Ocean.

A red sky offered a beautiful sunset as they watched the sun dip below the horizon of the Pacific Ocean, but this was of no comfort nor was it a time for taking in the wonders around them. Water crept up their legs, soaking their feet and clothing. Darkness came swiftly with a night sky illuminated with thousands of twinkling stars shone brightly above them. Shivering increased, and soon their movements were uncoordinated and their speech became slurred.

Herman encouraged Angeline and continued to try starting the stubborn engine.

Moonless, complete darkness surrounded them, and no lights were in sight except for the regularity of the Vancouver Rock Whistle Buoy just to the west of the rock. The buoy's whistle activated by the slight ocean swell was heard faintly, but otherwise they were alone. To the southeast, the manned Ivory Island Lighthouse beacon was seen rotating in the distance. Without any radio communications, those who staffed the lighthouse were unaware of Angeline and Herman's predicament.

Herman was preoccupied with the engine, to no avail. Angeline was angry for the quandary she now found herself. Time had no meaning, and after drifting four hours and nine miles, hope withered. Her hands had turned numb. Water crept up her pants legs like a siphon, and she could feel the boat slowly sinking into the black sea. She stared overboard into the precipice of the deep.

I pulled back the curtains to his stateroom window. Although it was just turning dark, I could see the myriad of stars and knew from the stilled fog whistle that the fog had dissipated. The *Matanuska* had just passed the remote communities of Bella Bella and Waglisla. Gripping the hand crank to the bulkhead-mounted telephone, I turned it rapidly to call the wheelhouse.

Answering the loud ring quickly, the mate picked up the receiver to hear the

captain say, “I’ll be in the officer’s mess room having dinner if you need to find me.”

“Roger that, Cap,” said the mate. “We’re just coming out of Lama Passage and entering into Seaforth Channel. We can see no fog ahead. We’ve secured the bow lookout and brought him to the wheelhouse, and the engines are no longer on standby.”

“That sounds good. I’m sure everyone gets tired of listening to our husky fog whistle.”

Readying myself for dinner, I descended the stairwell and walked aft to the officer’s mess room. My place at the captain’s table was set with placemat, silverware, coffee-cup, drinking glass. A lazy Susan filled the center of the table with condiments, and the menu. Stopping by the salad bar first, I picked through the makings and put together a salad. Then sitting down, I studied the entrée-filled menu: Teriyaki chicken wings, almond-crusted salmon or barbecue port roast, including garlic-mashed potatoes. With a notepad in hand, a waiter stood by to receive my order.

“I’ll have the almond-crusted salmon and garlic-mashed potatoes, with a glass of cranberry juice,” I said with a smile.

The server took the order back to the galley and the waiting cook.

North wind and choppy seas continued unabated with lethal consistency. Water crept upward inside the skiff in an apparent losing battle. There was no delaying the inevitable. Herman’s efforts produced not even an engine belch. Despair overwhelmed Angeline. Reaching into her coat pocket, she felt the packet of matches she had placed there earlier. They would do no good in the middle of Milbanke Sound.

Other than the sound of the northerly wind, it was a quiet night. A choppy sea pelted the stern and water continued slopping over the low-cut transom filling the boat. No other vessels were in sight; their only companions were the

multitude of stars, with the sweeping light of the Ivory Island Lighthouse on the southeastern horizon. With the temperature dropping ten degrees as soon as the sun had set, wind chill and cold soon overcame any sensations of warmth.

"*If only we had a radio to call the lighthouse, or flares to be seen*," thought Angeline.

A sharp eye detects motion quickly. Herman, with his head down working on the engine, did not look up and scan the horizon. Angeline did, however, look around and scan the horizon with her sharp eyes. Angeline kept her thoughts to herself. *"We'll soon sink, and disappear from the face of the earth."*

Despairing, she looked around in the event that there may be a passing boat. These surveys had been an exercise in disappointment, but this time her eyes caught the motion of white lights exiting from Seaforth Channel into Milbanke Sound very near the Ivory Island Lighthouse. Unsure what it may be, she watched intently.

"Herman, I think I see a ship coming our way."

Herman stopped his work for a moment and looked in the direction that Angeline had pointed. There, just passing the Ivory Island Lighthouse, were the masthead range lights of a large ship. A lower forward masthead light followed by a higher aft masthead light. A starboard side green sidelight became visible.

Indicating that the ship was turning, the range lights closed and then opened up again, but this time to reveal a port side red sidelight. The ship had changed course at Susan Rock proceeding northward toward the area of their drifting boat. Herman estimated that he and Angeline were still too far away to be noticed on a dark night as this.

In despair he said, “They’ll never see us.”

Thinking quickly, Angeline reached into her coat pocket and pulled out her box of dry matches. Taking off her jacket she said, “Herman, douse my jacket with some gasoline. I’ve some matches.”

Grasping the idea, Herman disconnected the gas line hose from the engine. Angeline, not wanting to walk aft in the nearly filled boat and upset its tender stability, tossed the jacket to Herman. Catching the flying jacket before it landed in the water, he hand-pumped the priming bulb and squeezed gasoline onto the jacket, soaking it well, but leaving a sleeve dry for Angeline to use as a torch handle.

Herman cautiously threw the gas soaked jacket toward the bow. Landing next to Angeline on the thwart, she picked it up and felt in the dark for the sleeve that was still dry. She waited until she thought the approaching ship was close enough to see her distress signal.

“I think they are close enough now,” she said to Herman.

Herman concurred saying, “Light up that coat, Angeline. We’ve not much time.”

Striking a match on the side of her matchbox with numb fingers was no easy task, but the match ignited immediately. She cupped the nascent flame in her cold hands to prevent the wind from blowing it out. Cautiously, she touched the small flicker to her jacket. It exploded in to a fury of orange flame. Bravely, Angeline grabbed the dry sleeve and began to twirl the burning coat above her head.

“Hey! Over here! Can you see us?” she shouted into the dark night, as though expecting someone on the ship to hear her voice.

Several rapid twirls of the flaming jacket were made above Angeline’s head. Illuminating their small boat in a rotating glow, Angeline’s eyes flashed bright

and intense, looking directly toward the M/V *Matanuska*. Her wind tossed hair trailed forward toward the open Pacific Ocean. Burning and melting, the jacket was quickly consumed, and with one last desperate twirl, Angeline let it fall into the sea before it burned her hand. Making no apparent reaction, the *Matanuska* continued with her northbound track.

This is the area of Milbanke Sound where the rescue of Herman and Angeline took place.

"I'm not sure they've seen us," she screamed.

Taking off her shirt, she tossed it to Herman. It was all or nothing, life or death.

"Douse it!"

Herman doused the shirt in gasoline as before, being careful to leave one sleeve dry. He threw the shirt back to Angeline sitting cold in her bra. With numb and shaking fingers, she again pulled another match from her matchbox and struck it on the side of the matchbox. Touching it quickly to the shirt, it ignited into a ball of spectacular, life-giving flame. For a few briefer moments than before, Angeline twirled her burning shirt above her head.

"Can you see us, ship?" she cried. "Look our way, please!" Consumed quickly in the heat of the flame, Angeline dropped the remains of her shirt into the sea. Profound darkness and silence closed in on the hapless couple. Herman was getting ready to soak his jacket with gasoline, when at the last moment Angeline and Herman could see the ship changing its course. Both the forward and the after masthead lights lined up in range, one above the other in line, and both port and starboard sidelights were now seen. Bright beams of search lighting soon pointed in their direction; the ship was coming toward them.

Four long blasts of the ship's whistle resonated across the waters of Milbank Sound.

Blast echoes struck Angeline and Herman's ears at the same time. It was music. "They've seen us. Oh! Thank God," said Angeline. "They are coming toward us!"

Waiting for my food, the chief engineer and I were talking in easy banter about the voyage and our fine ship. A jarring ring of the officer's mess room telephone shattered the conversation.

Reaching for the receiver, the waiter answered, "Yes, he is here."

"Captain, it's for you. It's important!"

Getting up, I quickly walked a few short steps to the telephone. It was not an unusual thing to be called while having dinner, guessing that the watch mate was about to inform me that we were about to enter into the fog once again.

"Captain, the bridge lookout, Michael Beach, has reported to me that he has seen a flame on the water, west of our position."

"I'll be right up. Change course toward the flame, and turn on the searchlights. Cast the beams out and ahead of the ship."

Without saying a word, I left the officer's mess room with a frown on my forehead. I ran up to the wheelhouse and forgot that I was ever hungry.

I found the wheelhouse watch engaged in an intense search of the dark horizon directly ahead. Searing beams of our two searchlights came together at a V- point well in front of our ship. Mates and lookouts focused their binoculars where the two beams came together for any sign of what made the mysterious flame.

"Are we heading to where the flame was last seen," I asked?

"Yes, Captain," came a reply out of the dark. "We just don't know how far away it was. We've seen a second burst of flame. Our engines are on standby and ready for immediate maneuvering."

"There, I see a metallic flash reflecting back to us!" cried a lookout.

All eyes and binoculars strained to see the flash, and as the *Matanuska* advanced, the rocking flashes became stronger and brighter, a small boat bobbing up and down on a choppy sea in an engulfing blackness. "Sound the General Alarm." Four long blasts of the ship's whistle spread out over the water. This was the *Matanuska*'s signal for mustering the emergency squad, and as an aside, to let the skiff's occupants know that we see them and help would soon arrive.

"Slow ahead," I ordered. Adjusting the throttles, the mate slowed the *Matanuska* as she approached the small boat dead ahead.

Refining my binocular focus, I studied the situation. Wind from the north, boat drifting to the south. Looks like two people onboard. I stepped to the consol and took the conn of the ship from the mate in an unspoken move.

"Come left three degrees on the compass," I ordered to the helmsman.

"Three degrees left on the compass," came the reply.

Steady on her new course, I shifted control of the ship out to the starboard bridge wing. There, from a high vantage point with a clear field of view, I pulled back more on the *Matanuska*'s throttles and brought the ship to a stop at a point downwind from the small drifting skiff. Using the bow thruster and engines, I maneuvered the *Matanuska* in order to hold her position in the wind and receive the skiff alongside below the starboard side door.

Discussing a plan of rescue with Chief Mate, Dennis Oldacres, it was decided

to rig a Jacob's ladder out the starboard side door while maneuvering to put the skiff alongside at the side door.

To the mate on watch I said, "Turn on all the outside emergency lighting." With a few flicks of the switches on the light panel, the night darkness surrounding the *Matanuska* retreated. All eyes turned toward the drifting skiff to find a woman sitting in her bra, shivering in the bow, and a man sitting on the stern thwart at the engine.

Passengers lined the starboard rails on the boat deck out of curiosity watching the action in hushed tones and surprise.

Knowing what he had to do and without any wasted words, the Chief Mate left the wheelhouse for the starboard side door. Crewmembers went into action and those in the emergency squad were mustered and ready with their equipment. Sliding open the starboard side door, a Jacob's ladder was secured quickly to the car deck and draping over the side in to the water.

Two seamen, harnessed and attached to lifelines while others held on to the lifelines to prevent them from falling overboard, prepared to help Angeline and Herman climb up the ladder.

To close the gap between the ship and the skiff, I gave the *Matanuska* a thrust with the bow thruster, and using our engines and rudders, moved the ship sideways to the skiff.

Peering over the starboard bridge wing, I looked directly down into the boat. Water sloshed back and forth and I could see that it was deep. The skiff appeared to be unstable.

Words were exchanged between Herman and the chief mate, and just as quickly my hand-held VHF radio broadcast Mr. Oldacre's voice filled with irony.

"Captain, this man wants us to throw him a heaving line. He wants to remove

his outboard engine, tie a heaving line around it, and have us pull it onboard." Coming as a bolt from the blue while watching the woman shivering in the cold, I felt the priority of the engine to be greatly misplaced.

"Deny his request," I replied to my radio. "Get the woman onboard and out of that skiff first. We can worry about the engine later." At the moment of rescue, Angeline wanted to save her life, Herman wanted to save his engine.

Waving off Herman's request, Chief Mate Oldacres motioned for Angeline to stand and grab a hold of the ladder and begin to climb up toward the harnessed sailors and their strong, helping hands.

With the onset of hypothermia, Angeline was losing control of any coordinated body movements. She stood and turned toward the Jacob's ladder clumsily, but with a firmness of mind to climb to safety. Her motion caused the skiff to list to its port side, so full was it of water. Her fingers numb, her hands cold, feeling weak in her legs, she gently pushed off the thwart she had been sitting upon and grabbed hold of the ladder.

Herman's mind, while focused on his new outboard engine, was trying to unbolt it from the skiff's transom with numb fingers and water up to his armpits.

Instantly, as Angeline pushed away from the skiff, a rush of water filled the boat from the low-cut transom. Responding to the newly added weight, the doomed skiff rolled over in one fast motion, dumping its contents and Herman into the sea. Except for a small pocket of air holding bow above the water for a brief moment, the skiff promptly sank. Spilling into the sea, Herman did a fast turnaround like an Olympic swimmer at the pool's edge, reaching for the Jacob's ladder.

Surprise echoed in to the cold night from the boat deck above, and I watched

in stunned disbelief the skiff sinking into the clear depths of Milbank Sound, riding along shafts of light from the ship's illumination as it descended like a birch leaf falling from a tree.

Watching it sink with fascination until the doomed craft could no longer be seen in the gloomy depths, I asked myself some unanswerable questions: *How do these things happen? Why did the fog dissipate when it did? If the skiff was this close to sinking, how were we able to be here in time enough to help?* If the fog continued, we would have never seen the flames, neither would Angeline and Herman seen our ship's navigation lights. Both people were extremely fortunate. Their boat was about to sink whether we were there or not. Every second counted. Angeline may have prayed for salvation, if so, her prayers had been answered.

Herman clung on to ladder for life as helping hands from above latched on to Angeline pulling her up and over the sponson onto the car deck. With what strength he had left, Herman pulled himself upward and then his feet found the ladder rungs. Repeating the same maneuver, the harnessed sailors attached to lifelines leaned over the edge and clasped on to Herman's clothing.

"Heave us up! We have him," a sailor shouted to those attending the lifelines. Pulling like a tug-of-war, they heaved the harnessed sailors and Herman up and over to the car deck, bringing some of the Jacob's ladder with them as Herman was reluctant to let go.

Angeline sat on the cold steel deck in shock, but she leaned over nonetheless, shivering, and kissed the deck. Herman was soaking wet and could not stand without help. Stewards were ready with warm blankets to throw around their shoulders and rush them upstairs to the warmth of the ship's interior, and a set of dry cloths.

Returning to our route, we made our way northward, arranging with the Boat Bluff Lighthouse keeper to meet the *Matanuska* with his workboat. Angeline

and Herman were dried, warmed, and given dry steward uniforms to wear. We dried their clothing in our laundry dryers. An hour later, the *Matanuska* arrived at Pering Point near the Boat Bluff Lighthouse. Stopping the ship, we lowered our port lifeboat to the water with Angeline and Herman onboard. The lighthouse keeper came alongside the suspended lifeboat with his workboat. Helping sailors transferred Angeline and Herman to the workboat and the good care of the Canadian lighthouse keeper. At daylight the next morning, the lighthouse keeper would take the couple to the village of Klemtu, only a few miles south of the lighthouse.

The Boat Bluff Lighthouse on the southern end of Sarah Island, just north of Klemtu.

Our good ship *Matanuska* resumed her northbound voyage to Ketchikan, disappearing shortly thereafter into a swirl of fog. Passing into the canyon lands and deep recesses of the Tolmie Channel, the Fraser Reach and the McKay Reach, our ship's magnificent whistle resounds once more, one deep blast every two minutes, echoing among the lonely mountains.

Written and Photographs Provided by Captain Bill Hopkins, AMHS Retired